

Story Theatre
(from Viola Spolin workshops)

Story Theatre incorporates the storyteller's narration into dramatic scenes. It is a simple and effective way to present myths, legends, and fairy tales without props, elaborate scenery, or extensive technical knowledge, and without sacrificing true theatre values. The players use body movement and space objects to convey the story. Very minimal sets and props (or none at all) are used. Story theatre, therefore, is ideally suited to the classroom.

In performance, players are at once the characters and the storytellers, working in simple open space, creating settings with vocal sound effects and minimal lighting, with only an occasional need for blocks or ramps to give shape to a set. In story theatre, the sense of time and space is effected through the narration and dialogue of the performers.

A story theatre performance looks like this: At the start of "Jack and the Beanstalk," a player comes onstage and speaks directly to the audience.

Jack & The Beanstalk

NAR Once upon a time there lived a boy by the name of Jack.

(As player is talking, Jack enters in character. Continuing narration)

One day Jack was walking about, looking for his cow, Bessie.

(JACK continues to move about the playing area, establishing for the audience where he is and improvising dialogue in character)

Jack continues to look for Bessie.

(JACK moves out into the audience looking for cow. Interacting with audience. Looking under bookbags, arms etc.)

But Bessie was no where to be found! Suddenly Jack's mother approached.

MOM (Enters and begins narration to the audience)
Jack's mother - that's me - was looking for her boy, as she had something very important to tell him.

(She begins looking for JACK)

NAR The mother looked and looked for Jack who looked and looked for Bessie the cow when suddenly who did appear but . . .

BESSIE (While the searching is going on BESSIE enters and saunters about the performance area) Bessie! Me the cow. Only cows can't talk. Moo, moo, moo!

MOM (Out in the audience the mother spots Jack. She chases him through the crowd and then finally gets him by the ear. After improvising the chases she grabs hold his ear and drags him to the stage)

 Now listen to me Jack!

NAR The mother said to her son. And as all mother's must do she pinched his ear to make sure he listened!

MOM We are very poor, son, and Bessie has stopped giving milk, and without milk to sell, we have no way of earning any money.

 (BESSIE reacts with shame and sadness. JACK goes to her out of comfort. Melodramatic and big!)

NAR Jack and Bessie were devastated.

BOTH Oh no! We're devastated!!!

JACK But mother . . . how can we sell Bessie?!?

 (JACK makes the bare stage a farm by taking hay from an invisible hay stack and feeding the cow. The pantomime becomes larger when Bessie gets involved. BESSIE munches happily.)

NAR Despite their objections Jack's mother insisted that Bessie be sold. So Jack, leading his beloved Bessie from the barn, slowly headed down the road toward the County Fair. Suddenly . . .

 (JACK and BESSIE improvise leaving the barn and circling the stage slowly and sadly. On the first cycle the mother watches and waves sadly backing away as the second cycle begins and the mother fades into the background. She is passed by a man on a bicycle who peddles slowly toward JACK)

BEAN GUY . . . Jack was greeted by a funny looking old man who said to him . . . "Well, young man, where are you off to, with that fine cow?"

NAR Jack looked at the old man and said . . .

JACK I'm off to the fair to sell our cow!

The combination of narration and dialogue continues on to the end of the story.

Let both the narrator and the characters within the story tell the story. Let them be a part of the action of the plot. Here are some steps that will lead to a full-length scene.

STEPS TO STORY THEATRE PRODUCTION PIECE

1. Find a story for development.
2. Familiarize your group with the story. Make copies and read it aloud as a group.
3. Explore the where in the story. What do players see in the story? How can the where be created? How can the group add texture, dimension and layers to the story?
4. Cast the story. This can be done by the group leader or it can be self-cast. To accommodate a large group, you may stage players to be in charge of sound effects, lighting and properties.
5. The group needs to develop the skeleton of the play first and then work on a developed script. Note that the script need not carry all stage directions and dialogue. It is a working script that develops as the production is workshopped.
6. Workshop your ideas. Don't just sit and discuss - get up and experiment. Brainstorm for ideas.
 - * what vocal sounds can we use?
 - * what music can we add?
 - * can we adapt instrumental music and write our own lyrics?
 - * can we create costumes either as characters or as a group?
 - * can we create props?
 - * can we build a basic backdrop?
 - * how can we use lighting?
 - * can actors become scenery (e.g. trees, houses, flowers etc.)?
7. Sources: Grimm, Aesop, Lear, Andersen, local legends and tales.

Example of a Skeleton

The Three Little Pigs

1. A very poor Mother Pig sends her three children out into the world to seek their fortunes.
2. The first little pig is given straw by a peasant and builds a straw house.
3. A wolf comes, blows down the straw house, and chases the little pig away. (The first and second pigs are, of course, eaten in some versions.)
4. The second little pig receives sticks from a woodcutter and builds a house of sticks.
5. The wolf comes, blows down the stick house, and chases the second little pig away.
6. The third (and cleverest) little pig gets bricks from a mason and builds a house of bricks.
7. The wolf comes and tries to blow down the house. When he fails, he tries other tricks to get in, but is still unsuccessful. He decides to try sliding down the chimney.
8. The third little pig builds a big fire in the fireplace to keep out the wolf.
9. The chimney is too hot for the wolf, so, giving up, he goes away. (In many versions, the wolf comes to his end in a pot on the third pig's stove.)
10. The third pig fetches the mother (and the remaining brothers or sisters), and they live happily ever after in the brick house.

Story Theatre Production Piece

In your groups you are to create a Story Theatre Presentation that will be both video taped and then performed live in front of Elementary School Children. Your production will be workshopped as outlined in your previous notes. Outside of the actual performance you must include the following in the form of a printed project:

1. Copy of the original story with the names of all group members attached. Elect a director.
2. A Skeletal Outline of the story.
3. A Basic Script.
4. A Cast List.
5. A Costume Outline.
6. A Staging Outline.
7. A Sound/Music Outline.
8. A Set Design.

Evaluation will be based upon the printed project (20%) and the performance itself (80%). Students who are not providing a positive input to the production will be given an independent study. Evaluation of this work will vary depending upon the circumstances.

Hopefully each group will be given a separate area in which to workshop their productions. All groups will begin each period meeting in A-189 and conclude in the same manner. Journals are essential during this experience. I expect all students to provide at least 3 Journal Entries per week!

Groups will be given 8 class periods to plan, workshop, rehearse and build the show. Throughout this time I will work with each group for a minimum of one full period. At the end of 8 periods there will be a dress rehearsal in front of the class. At this time notes will be given before a period of polishing. Final productions will be in 10 classes.

All students need to utilize not only their knowledge of Story Theatre, but their collective experience thus far in Theatre Arts. Be as creative and imaginative as possible. Use all resources available to you. Reach for a performance that will not only entertain, but one that will be a memorable experience for the audience.